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## Addressing health disparities with tobacco policy research

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At the recent Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) Annual Meeting, the Policy Research Network asked members to consider today's most important policy research priorities. While much of the discussion focused on e-cigarettes, health warnings and advertising, there was a strong cross-cutting focus on the role of tobacco policy in addressing health disparities. It is fitting that, as the Society's journal, the articles in this issue of *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*, which is dedicated to research on tobacco policy, reflect the research priorities of our community. In a qualitative systematic review published in this issue, examining how young people in Europe engage with tobacco control policies, Papanastasiou and colleagues highlight cross-generational, cross-cultural and cross-country research as three important priorities for tackling health disparities (1).

First, by identifying the paucity of qualitative research among young Europeans, Papanastasiou and colleagues demonstrate the need for more research to understand how young people may resist, adapt or comply with tobacco control policies (1). This call for cross-generational research is echoed by Thrasher and colleagues (2) in their review of priorities for tobacco product warning labels research, where much of the focus has been on adult smokers. Other articles in this issue focus on the role of advertising on tobacco use among youth. Beleva and colleagues investigate the role of point-of sale advertising on tobacco use among at-risk adolescents (3), while Soneji and colleagues assess adolescent engagement with online tobacco marketing, and Cruz and colleagues examine the impact of five types of tobacco marketing on adolescents' initiation of tobacco products (4). These studies find that in the USA (a notable non-signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (5), which requires comprehensive tobacco advertising bans), exposure to advertising has increased over time and that exposure is linked to tobacco initiation. With two-thirds of smokers in the UK starting before the age of 18 (9) and similar numbers in the USA, it is vital that our research continues to examine the impact of tobacco control policies on youth.

Second, as smoking becomes increasingly linked with social disadvantage, our research must focus on vulnerable groups. This is important given that some tobacco control policies are likely to be differentially effective cross-culturally. Indeed, Papanastasiou and colleagues find that age of sale laws are particularly easy to circumvent in more disadvantaged areas where retailers appear more willing to permit proxy sales (1). Also in this issue, Giovenco and colleagues find neighbourhood differences in the availability of cheaper combustible tobacco products and lower-risk non-combustible products, with reduced-risk options less common in low-income minority neighbourhoods (6). An analysis of tobacco industry documents reported in this issue finds that the tribal sovereignty of American Indians/Alaskan Natives is exploited by the tobacco industry to circumvent tobacco control policies (7). Together, the articles in this issue of *Nicotine*

*and Tobacco Research* highlight that many vulnerable groups are underserved by current tobacco control policies and that these policies have the potential to widen health disparities.

Finally, Papanastasiou and colleagues' qualitative systematic review highlights the need for cross-country tobacco policy research. They find that the majority of articles included in their review were conducted in the UK with only 11 of the 53 countries in the European region represented. Cross-country research can examine the transferability of evidence to countries at different stages of the tobacco epidemic and with different types of tobacco control policies. In this issue, Reid and colleagues examine the effectiveness of tobacco warnings across seven different countries in a project affiliated with the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project (ITC-Project) (8). They find few cross-country differences in ratings of the most and least effective warnings, which has important implications for the sharing of effective warnings between countries. However, it is likely that the effectiveness of other tobacco control policies, such as smoking bans, age of sale restrictions and cessation programmes promoting e-cigarettes, which rely on public and policymaker support, may be more strongly influenced by social and cultural norms, as well as the political and economic regulatory environment.

With tobacco use increasingly linked with vulnerable groups and with the burden of disease in low and middle-income countries burgeoning, we must focus our attention on conducting research with these groups and in these countries. We must question whether existing tobacco control policies best serve these groups, whether policies should be reshaped to specifically target them and what new policies and interventions might be more effective. Tobacco health disparities are one of the most critical issues we face as a community. Our policy research targeting vulnerable groups and those in low and middle-income countries will be crucial for closing the health disparity gap.

Words: 771

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